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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a qualitative study at an at-risk primary school after a year of implementing educational changes. The paper opens with a detailed diary of the author's first morning observing the principal in action at the school. The analysis of data and field notes centers on the strengths of the principal's leadership, and the themes in the educational environment he has implemented. Three themes of the school's change are discussed: the principal's caring style of leadership, the empowerment offered by the principal to students, faculty and staff, parents and the community, and the problem solving approach adopted by the school. The article then discusses how the principal created an environment of caring, empowering and conciliation for each element of the school population--students, parents, and staff. The implications of these changes for restructuring the framework of the traditional school system are considered. (Contains 20 references.) (JPB)

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From Apathy to Caring: A Changing School An Educational Criticism

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> Millions of children are not safe physically, educationally, economically, or spiritually . . . The poor black youths who shoot up drugs on street corners and the rich white youths who do the same thing in their mansions share a common disconnectedness from any hope or purpose.
>
> Marian Wright Edelman (1989)
> Children's Defense Fund

Reestablishing a Relationship

As I dialed the (once familiar) number of Lucie B. Tyng Primary, I began to feel nervous. It had been so long (a year) since I had had any contact with administrators, teachers, or students in this at risk school. Had they changed? Would they remember me? Would I be welcomed? Finally, when the busy signal sounded in my ear I felt immediate relief, which quickly faded because I realized I had not accomplished my goal. The excitement of a challenge over took me, and I spent the next 20 minutes pushing the redial button and listening to the droning of the busy signal, while reading an article on educational leaders and caring.

I heard a different noise. It was ringing--success! After seven rings, I heard Lynn's familiar voice, "Success for all at Tyng. This is Lynn. May I help you?" I identified myself and asked if Tim Ryon (the principal) was there. She said, "I know he is here, but I don't know if he's available. I'll check." "Click," I was put on hold and anxiously waited for several minutes. Then I heard Tim's voice--soft-spoken and sounding excited to hear from me. "Rosalyn, hello--a voice from the past--how are you doing?" Relief flooded me, and we spent a few minutes catching-up.

He agreed to allow me to complete a qualitative study (educational criticism) examining whether his caring leadership style had an affect on school improvement. I spent a few minutes telling him that I would shadow, interview, and collect artifacts from the environment. He wanted to know about educational criticism, and I briefly explained

the descriptive, interpretative, evaluative, and thematic components of the methodology Eisner, 1994). We ended our conversation with a comparison of Tyng's past environment to its current atmosphere. Tim said, "We've come a long way. We have a way to go. But these are humans, and it takes a long time. You know how things here get crazy." I hung-up the phone and reflected on the "craziness" of Tyng and was thrilled to be apart of Tyng's "madness," once again.

The One Caring: A Description

They drew a circle to shut me out.
Heretics, rebels, and things to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win.
I drew a circle that took them in.

Edwin Markham
in "Outwitted"

8:02 a.m.

My first morning at Tyng was chilly, and I hurried through the front doors and turned an immediate right to enter the main office. To the left and through a narrow doorway was a long, rectangular shaped room that housed a desk for the records clerk at one end, a coffee maker toward the middle, and the administrative assistants' office at the opposite end. I peeked in and noticed that Tim, a teacher, and the administrative assistant were having a conversation. I heard, "I'll do two lists. And I'm just going to have those bad kids on the list put their heads down. What do you think?" "Let's say, 'Those kids on the list who made bad choices,'" the administrative assistant suggested. The teacher rephrased, "Those kids who made bad choices will have to put their heads down." The conversation continued. Then Tim noticed me, smiled, mouthed, "Hello," and quickly returned his attention to listen to the teacher and invited her to problem solve. As Tim continued the dialogue, the administrative assistant left to deal with a bus problem. At the end of the conversation, as the teacher headed toward the office door, she thanked Tim for listening and giving suggestions. He responded, "It wasn't me.

You are the one who came-up with a solution that helps you and still respects children." The teacher smiled, nodded her head, and walked down the hall.

8:15 a.m.

The office was full of students, parents, teachers, and noise. "Insanity" was the first word that popped into my head. New students were checking into Tyng--old students were checking out. Continually, the telephone rang, was answered, and rang some more. Tim asked a few parents if they had been helped, and they nodded their heads in agreement. He answered the telephone. When finished, he motioned for me to follow him into his office located behind main office. He took his coat off a coat rack, so I would have a place for mine. I protested saying I did not want to take his hook, but he refused to change his mind. Feeling guilty, I hung my coat, while he threw his coat on top of several others.

8:20 a.m.

I followed him out of his office and into the main office, where teachers and staff began questioning him, in rapid-fire secession. He remained calm, soft-spoken, and respectfully reflected many questions back to the adults and allowed them to find their own solutions.

8:27 a.m.

The round of questions ended. Tim went back into the coffee area and started to clean-up a coffee mess. Coffee grounds and water were running over the top of the filter basket and onto the floor. Tim said, "I tried to make coffee for everyone this morning and look what happened." Lynn (secretary) smiled and took over the clean-up.

8:32 a.m.

We headed toward the cafeteria. Along the way, Tim listened and responded to two teachers, engaged two angry boys in problem solving and gave two girls and one boy hugs and compliments. In the cafeteria, children were eating breakfast. Tim said to an older student, "I want you to take care of Wily." The older boy took the younger boy

by the hand and led him to the bleachers to sit until it was time to go to class. Several students surrounded Tim to get their dose of attention and affection from him.

8:37 a.m.

Tim moved to the stage area, where two kindergarten students were fighting. He sat down on carpeted stairs, put one boy on his lap, cradled the other child close to his side, and waited silently. With an angry look, one boy yelled, "Wipe my butt." Tim remained quiet--not responding to the comment. The boys started to calm down and Tim asked, "Do you want to work this out?" The angry expressions drained from their faces, and the boys smiled coyly. Tim continued, "You can--it's up to you. If you want to solve this problem, you can." They ended their problem solving by stating what was expected of them and then went to the bleachers to sit. For the next several minutes, he continued to model for students how to be respectful, how to problem solve, and how to help one another. As we left the breakfast area, Tim said, "Janel, will you take Shamica to Mrs. D? She needs your help." Janel looked proud and took the six-year-old student's hand and guided her down the hall.

8:44 a.m.

Back in the office, Tim turned his attention to adults and children, who had congregated, with many questions:

- "Do we get ASCD?"
- "Do we need subs for the Success For All people?"
- "Do you remember who Shaylee's teacher is? She's sick and needs to go home."
- "Can I get a hat? I left mine at home, and my ears are cold."
- "Do you think we can expect our new student, today?"
- "Anne can't start her car. Do I need to get someone to cover her class?"
- "Are we going to get to play outside today?"
- "Head lice again! Do you think we can have mother pick-up some medicine at Tyng?"
- "How are we going to handle breakfast and lunch time today?"

8:50 a.m.

Questions ended. Tim moved to the intercom system located on the left side of a long counter against the back wall and began writing down last minute additions to the morning's announcements. A father came into the office and said, "Can I talk to you about my son?" Supportively, Tim stopped writing, listened to a few words, and quietly invited the parent to step into his office, as he shut the door. I waited on the outside and reflected on how sensitive Tim had been with the father, who was visibly upset. Several minutes later, the father emerged (looking relieved) and thanked Tim for his help and patience concerning his son. Tim responded with sincerity, "That's why we're here. To help our children at Tyng."

9:07 a.m.

Tim started the morning announcements a few minutes late. However, he still greeted individuals at Tyng with a calm and bright, "Good morning everyone!" Announcements were given. Next, Tim asked first-graders to come to the office, if they had an answer to his incorrect nursery rhyme: "Little Miss Muffet, sat on her sofa." Then a fourth-grade student said the pledge of allegiance. Finally, Tim ended the day's message with a cheery, "Have a happy day everyone." He affirmed the boy who said the pledge and gave him a sticker for speaking loudly and clearly into the microphone. A line of first-graders, wiggling with anticipation to correct the nursery rhyme had gathered. They waited patiently for their turn to receive recognition and accolades from Tim. He asked each student to respond. With each response, the child got either a pat or a hug and a sticker--along with a "Good job."

9:20 a.m.

Tim went into the administrative assistant's office and dispensed medication to four students. He called each child by name and complimented them for remembering to come to the office to take their medicine. Back in the main office, he answered a couple of questions, picked-up his announcement folder, and headed to his office. I

followed.

9:26 a.m.

In his office (with no desk), Tim sat down at a circular table and began to fill out tomorrow's announcement sheet, while he explained to me his format for the daily announcements. Tim also exclaimed that Tyng's mascot was a tiger and the tiger emblem was used often. He started to describe other ritual activities used to build a sense of community but was interrupted by a teacher Ms. J and a student named Benka. Ms. J. said, "Mr. Ryon we're here ..." Tim affectionately interrupted her in a teasing voice, "I know why Ms. J. is here. You know Benka, Ms. J. can't give 'I caught you being good' tickets to her own students, so she comes over here and brags on her students, so I'll do it." Looking at the student he continued, "Did you know that?" The boy nodded his head. Ms J. laughingly responded, "Well, you know Mr. Ryon this is Benka's second one, cause Ms. B. said he was doing a very good job in the cafeteria." "I know, you are just trying to run me out of tickets," Tim teased. Then he complimented Benka on his helpfulness and gave him a small slip of paper. On the strip of paper was a picture of an angel and the words: "I'm a Tyng Angel! I was caught being good by Mr. Ryon!!" Then Tim told Benka he was proud of him and patted him on the back. Light-heartedly, Ms. J. and Tim continued jesting back and forth, while he finished filling out his announcement sheet. It was obvious that they had developed a trusting relationship. Tim closed his announcement folder, picked it up, and headed into the main office, with Ms. J. and Benka following.

9:43 a.m.

For the next thirty minutes, Tim navigated the halls. First, he stopped, stuck his head in one classroom, and asked the teacher if she had any students finished with their work. She nodded her head, and he continued, "I was hoping that some of your students would be willing to make our halls look better, by picking up the paper on the floor in front of their lockers." Kids began to volunteer, Tim shut the door, and we

continued down the hall.

9:48 a.m.

We turned, headed back toward the office, and started up a ramp linking the main floor to the second floor. We heard a commotion and discovered that students had been dismissed from gym and were heading back to their regular room. Tim stood at the bottom of the ramp, and waited, with a firm look on his face. His presence and look slowed most of the children. However, two boys engrossed in a race were going so fast that they could not slow down and continued to skid right by Mr. Ryon. With his arms folded across his chest, Tim stood silently and looked directly at the students. Both boys froze, with an "Oh, no. We got caught looks" upon their faces. Still, Mr. Ryon did not speak. The boys became nervous and started to fidget. One boy said, "Okay, I'll go back and walk the right way." He slowly walked up the ramp and back down. Tim continued to look at the other boy. The child finally followed suit and headed up and down the ramp.

9:52 a.m.

As the boys past us, we continued up the ramp to second floor. Tim stopped by several rooms and delivered messages to teachers. He stopped by other rooms to check on students. We covered the second floor and headed down to first floor at the opposite end of the building. Tim stopped by a classroom and saw it was empty. He wondered aloud, "Where are they?" Tim located the class in the library and opened the door carefully--we quietly walked in and waited. The librarian told Mr. Ryon how well the students had taken books off the shelves. Then, looking at librarian and the classroom teacher, Tim began to explain his reason for being there. He said:

> I just wanted both of you to know how proud I am of Tony and James. They should feel really proud of themselves, right now. They were running down the ramp really fast, saw me, and stopped. I could tell they were thinking, "How can I solve this problem?" Then, without any words from me, they walked up the ramp and back down again. I wanted their teachers to know what good problem solvers they have become.

The teachers complimented the students. The boys puffed up with pride.

9:57 a.m.

We left the library and headed down the hall toward the office. Tim noticed the cluttered hall had been cleaned. He stuck his head in the room and announced how pleased he was with the appearance of the hall. He thanked the students and teacher "for caring about our school," and we headed to the office. In the office, the same routine was played out--questioning and seeking solutions, with students, parents and staff. The parent volunteer wanted a check to buy popcorn supplies; the security person had to share information about a stolen purse; the teacher needed to know about the payment of tuition for an upcoming class, and the student was waiting to do problem solving with Tim, because he was too angry to problem solve in his classroom.

10:26 a.m.

Walking to a teacher's observation, we talked about Tyng's growth and how Mr. Ryon thought he might have encouraged and nurtured improvement. Tim said:

> I see a change in the attitude among teachers, which is to be expected [with SFA]. It was what I've been trying to affect. In two ways--conscience ways--the conflict resolution model for teachers . . .then more recently. . .started this year, purposefully. . . is to turn situations back over to them. And not quite in these words but as much to say: 'What do you want to do about it?' Lots of listening, lots of eye contact, lots of reaffirmation, lots of repeating what they have told me. . . 'How would you like to see this resolved?' . . . 'What do you suppose we can do about it?' Sometimes, I say, 'What is it, you expect of me?' . . . 'What is it, you expect of the children?' Nine times out of ten, by the time we get to that point, they'll say, 'Why don't I just take him and solve the situation.' This is what I am hoping will happen. However, there are some days like the old days when we hassle the same old attitude.

We arrived at the teacher's door, walked in quietly, and sat down in the back. The observation lasted approximately thirty minutes. Next, Tim bent down, talked with students at a table, and we left the room.

11:03 a.m.

After a quick stop in the office to grab his apron, we headed toward the cafeteria, while Tim tied the strings of his apron. In the lunch room, he went to the medicine cart and began distributing medication to a line of students. With each pill given, Tim marked it on a chart. One group of students left their table, and Tim went to the table and began to wash it down. Next, Mr. Ryon helped children solve issues.

11:33 a.m.

Another brief stop in the office, this time to get his coat and pick-up the five second grade children who had earned a lunch trip to Burger King for reading the most books. Tim had asked me to join them, and I agreed. When I told him I needed to get my purse out of my car he told me that I didn't need it because lunch was taken care. Mr. Ryon then bought our lunches with his own money and the children's lunches were donated by Burger King. During the lunch, each child shared his or her favorite book, and Tim praised them frequently for reading so many books. After lunch, the children thanked the manager, were loaded into Tim's van, and we headed back to Tyng.

* * * *

The afternoons at Tyng were similar to the mornings--hectic. The end of the school day was extremely chaotic. Having questions that needed last minute answers, the main office was usually stuffed with parents, teachers, students, and staff patiently waiting for their opportunity to talk to the principal. Observation after observation, reflected that Tim treated each person as important, listened to them carefully, and had taken each of their problems seriously. During a conversation, Mr. Ryon said, "I've talked to principals who said they just go into their office and shut their doors to get work done. Can you see me doing that?"

The Cared For: An Interpretation

> The need for care in our present culture is acute. Patients feel uncared for in our medical system; clients feel uncared for in our welfare system; old people feel uncared for in the facilities provided for them; and children, especially adolescents, feel uncared for in schools. Not only is the need for caregiving great and rapidly growing, but the need for that special relation--caring--is felt most acutely.
>
> Noddings (1992, xi)

While collecting data and transcribing field notes, three distinct themes emerged. First, in examining this at risk school, it became quite clear that this principal had a caring style of leadership. A second theme, closely related to the first, was that Mr. Ryon was an empowering leader. Finally, it was obvious that Mr. Ryon firmly believed in the merits of problem solving, and showed individuals how to find solutions. These attributes (caring, empowering, and conciliating) are examined on the following pages.

A Caring Leader

> Yes, caring definitely describes Tim--very much so. He literally loves all these children. Actually, he cares about all of us.
>
> Tyng Teacher

Though the concept of caring can be elusive (Beck, 1994), many have attempted to define its "true" meaning in different ways (Regan and Brooks, 1995; Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1992). Although different, interpretations of caring have common patterns. First, caring involves having an accepting attitude or a positive way of viewing the world and looking for "good" in everyone and everything--receiving others unconditionally. Next, caring means creating accepting relationships over time, where persons respond to each other's needs, with commitment and mutuality. Third, caring encompasses communicating the importance of personal growth and believing all humans have potential that can be developed. In other words, "caring implies a continuous search for competence" (Noddings, 1995).

Tim Ryon unconditionally accepted others, created quality relationships, and valued human growth. In a survey, one hundred percent (of those who responded) said, "caring" was a word that could be used to described their principal. Additionally, during interviews and conversations, the word "caring" was often used to describe Tim's interactions with others. Unusual for many leaders? No. Nonetheless, Tyng has a reputation of being a tough and emotionally draining place to work. Moreover, it has had a history of leaders that were so battered and consumed by angry children, hostile parents or surrogates, and discouraged teachers. Yet, adults said Tim was not like other administrators they had had at Tyng. "He is not as rigid and, at times, not as organized, but he knows how to care," said one individual. For this discussion, the idea of caring will be examined from three perspectives--caring for students, caring for teachers and staff, and caring for parents and community.

Caring for children.

Tim Ryon cared about Tyng's children. He often called them Tyng's angels, as seen on his "caught you being good" tickets. In his office, Mr. Ryon even had a collection of small ceramic angels that graced the top of a bookcase (that held children's literature) and a table in the corner. Tim Ryon exhibited caring for children by listening with full attention, building positive relationships, modeling caring, and showing children how to care for each other.

With the approximately 40 hours of observation notes, what became apparent is that Tim took each student and his or her issue seriously--not easy in such a fast-paced school environment. When children came to the office they knew that Mr. Ryon would listen and try to understand the problem from their perspective. To illustrate, on the playground, where two boys were searching for Mr. Ryon. They said, "We gotta find Mr. Ryon." I asked, "Why?" Pointing to the playground person, one boy responded, "Cause she don't hear us, and Mr. Ryon will." Another example took place in the office, where three girls were waiting for their turn to speak with Mr. Ryon. A teacher asked them,

"Can I help?" With a look of shock, they responded, "NO! Only Mr. Ryon can help." Besides knowing the value of attentive listening, Tim understood the importance of building positive student relationships.

To build a trusting relationship, he made opportunities to spend time with students. Tim took children to Burger King, as a reward for reading books. When children had appropriate bus behavior Mr. Ryon gave students parties and read to them. He was on the playground interacting with students. This "getting to know each other" period gave Tim the opportunity to have open-ended dialogue with students, which research tells us is important for building caring relations (Witherell and Noddings, 1991). Mr. Ryon believed what Alfie Kohn said: "It's hard to work with a student to solve a problem unless the two of you already have a relationship on which to build" (1996, p. 122).

In addition to listening and building relationships, Tim showed students that he cared about them in several ways. He knew and used approximately 700 children's names when interacting with them. Tim used touch as a sign of caring. Children were given hugs, pats on the back and head, hands resting on shoulders. Without any reservations, students continually pursued Mr. Ryon for attention. Next, Tim modeled caring verbally. He told children that he cared for them and (occasionally) that he loved them. Frequently, Mr. Ryon complimented students. During one recess, he complimented three girls' and one boy's hair styles, a boy's shoes, two students' coats, one boy's book bag, and one child's hat. Finally, Tim desired to help and was attentive when children were in need (Noddings, 1992). He was not above helping students with zippers, hats, coats, shoe laces, or lost siblings, which modeled that he respected and valued each of them.

Tim took caring one step further. He showed children how they could care for each other. In other words, he allowed them to practice the act of caring. As written about in the descriptive section of this paper, Mr. Ryon often asked older students to

care for younger children or asked pupils to care for their school. To reiterate, he said, "Janel, will you take Shamica to Mrs. D? She needs your help" . . . "I want you to take care of Wily." . . . [Thank you] "for caring about our school," Highlighting the importance of teaching students how to care, Nel Noddings said, "If we regard our relations with intimate others as central in moral life, we must provide all our children with practice in caring" (1992, p. 52).

Caring for adults at Tyng.

Not only did Mr. Ryon care for children at Tyng, but he cared about the well-being of adults. As witnessed in observations and interviews, Tim showed adults that he cared by listening, building accepting and respectful relationships, and modeling how he cared for students and adults. Although not witnessed in observations, Mr. Ryon said that, in the past, he did not listen attentively enough to adults. He had to train himself to listen more carefully to teachers and staff and not to minimize their problems. He stated, "I try really hard to take every situation seriously." Evidently, his conscious attempts at listening paid off, since many adults (surveyed) believed that Mr. Ryon really listened to them. Adults said, "He is a fabulous listener." . . . "Our principal 'listens' and responds to everyone." . . . [He] "listens and [is] supportive professionally and personally." Furthermore, Mr. Ryon believed that school improvement was a result of his ability to listen. He said, "I attribute that [school improvement] to having spent a lot of time, in the beginning, listening" [to adults].

Besides listening, another noteworthy quality of Tim's interactions with adults was his ability to develop connections (relationships) by respecting and accepting each person, regardless of where they were at, professionally and personally. This attitude of unconditional acceptance and respect is reflected in the following comment--stated earlier and reiterated here. He said, "We've come a long way. We have a way to go. But these are humans, and it takes a long time." Further proof is presented, with the following two examples. First, Tim completed an observation, where a teacher exhibited

poor pedagogical skills. Rather than focusing on the negative, Tim said, "I decided to focus on what I saw that was positive. . . She did have her students in groups, and she did do the 'my turn, your turn' well. That's a start, and we'll go from there." Second, in a conversation about progress, he noted, "It was my goal when I came here to make the staff feel supported and consequently competent. Thought it would take much longer, but it hasn't." "Emotional labor . . . [or] consciously working oneself into experiencing the necessary feelings required to perform one's job well" (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 16) seems a fitting way to describe Tim Ryon's interactions with adults at Tyng. He never lost sight of making adults feel supported, and he selected reactions that produced the proper state of mind in others. For example, one teacher said, "All ideas are excepted and suggestions are made not to discourage or to control, but rather, to encourage and promote a happy, nurturing climate for teachers, as well as students."

In addition to listening and building connections, Mr. Ryon modeled for adults how he cared about them and how to care for Tyng's children. For instance, Tim wrote appreciation notes to teachers. He stopped by their rooms to deliver accolades and roamed the halls in search of ways he could provide assistance and compliments. Tim showed concern about adults' health and their family members' health. He donated contributions to worthy causes that Tyng adults valued. Mr. Ryon offered to take adults home when they had no transportation and to pick them up when their cars would not start. At Tyng, adults knew that Mr. Ryon cared about them, as reflected in their following comments. They said, "He's caring and understanding about the teachers as individuals." . . . "He's caring and understanding as regards to our commitments to our families." . . ."He models caring for faculty and students." . . . "The feelings one has , while working in this building are hard to describe. It's like home and you are among friends. Our leader models what he wants us to model."

Additionally, adults in this school believed that Mr. Ryon showed them how to care for their students. Observations showed that Tim gave teachers many

opportunities to feel proud of their students' accomplishments, for he continually bragged on children's achievements. Teachers stated, "Tim is particularly caring in the way he tends to the children." . . . "The most important thing about Tim is that he is there for the children, not himself." . . . "He loves our children, something past principals did not!" . . . "With him, the child is always first." . . . "He shows us and the children through positive language and providing limitations." . . . "Tim cares, and students who feel cared for are more caring to others." . . . "Our principal models what he expects us to model for children and parents."

Caring for parents and community members.

Tim Ryon showed parents and community members that he cared for them, by listening, developing relationships, and modeling that he cared. When parents, surrogates, or community members came to Tyng to talk with Mr. Ryon, he stopped whatever he was doing to listen carefully. If the issue was private, he would take the individual into his office and shut the door. At times, parents had to wait their turn, but they did not seem to mind.

Along with listening, Mr. Ryon was able to make connections with parents and others by showing a respectful concern for each person's life situation and his or her family. He had an uncanny knack for knowing the "ins" and "outs" of extended families. Tim would often ask, calling persons by name, the whereabouts and well-being of parents or grandparents, brothers or sisters, aunts or uncles, nieces or nephews, cousins, and grandchildren. Furthermore, having a long history in the community helped Mr. Ryon develop positive connections to parents and community members. Although only at Tyng for three years, he had spent several years in schools located near Tyng, such as Blaine Sumner and Roosevelt.

In addition to listening, and making connections, Mr. Ryon let parents know he cared about their children and therefore, cared about them. To improve education for children, Joyce L. Epstein (1995) discusses the importance of developing reciprocal

relationships between schools, parents, and communities. She states:

> The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. . . . [When] educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students (p. 70).

Tim worked hard at developing a personal relationship between Tyng adults and parents, where the main goal was to improve the "achievement and well-being of their own children" (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 20).

Tim Ryon's caring leadership style was discussed in the preceding pages. He showed children, adults, and community that he cared in a number of different ways. First, in all of his interactions with persons (big or small), he listened with full attention. Second, Mr. Ryon valued making connections and developing positive relationships over time, with children, staff, and parents. Finally, Tim taught the art of caring by doing many acts of kindness and by showing individuals how to care for each other. Closely related to caring, another virtue that Mr. Ryon had as an effective leader was his ability to empower those around him.

<u>An Empowering Leader</u>

> A leader is best when people barely know he exists.
> Not so good when people obey and acclaim him. Worse
> when they despise him. But of a good leader who talks
> little when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will
> say, "We did it ourselves."
>
> --Lao-tzu (604-531 B.C.)
> Chinese sage and poet

Drake and Roe (1994) tell us that "a major leadership role of the principal is to identify and nourish any ideas, acts, and efforts that will further the goals and objectives of the institution" (p. 141). Tim Ryon provided this type of positive leadership at Tyng

Primary. Furthermore, his ability to share power or his empowerment of students, staff, and community members (for the improvement of all children's education) seemed a natural part of his personality. Tim knew what research indicates--power shared is expanded and reciprocated and has synergistic qualities (Deiro, 1996; Kohn, 1996; Regan and Brooks; 1995; Drake and Roe, 1994).

Empowering students.

Mr. Ryon empowered students in three ways. First, he allowed them to make their own choices. Often, he was heard asking, "What is expected, right now?" If the child did not understand, Tim would respond, "What should you be doing, right now?" He believed that if children knew the expectations, then they would make knowledgeable decisions based on what was best for them. It was rare for Mr. Ryon to tell kids "what to do" or "how to do it."

Second, Tim showed students how to make amends. After a student had explained a problematic situation, Tim would say, "What can you do to make it better?" Once the child decided upon a plan to improve his or her situation, Mr. Ryon would say, "What can I do to help you with your plan?" Habitually, he would write letters to teachers and go to their rooms to talk, as a way of ensuring the child a smooth transition back into the classroom. By giving clear expectations and a way to make amends, Mr. Ryon knew that students would develop stronger, more positive self-images. In other words, "When kids feel right, they'll behave right" (Faber, Mazlish, Nyberg, and Anstine Templeton, 1995, p. 23).

Third, Mr. Ryon empowered students by showing them how to care for one another. He made it "right" for older students to take care of the younger students. Tim created countless opportunities for students to be kind and helpful to adults and one another. He, in turn, was kind and helpful to students. For instance when students were too angry to talk, Tim allowed them to sit on the rug and read books or play with his angel collection. When children were feeling "bad" about themselves, Mr. Ryon

restored their self-images by having them help him do errands. Students would take books to the library, deliver items or notes to teachers, and go to classrooms to escort younger students to the office. Once the child was calm or feeling better, Tim would invite the student to resolve the issue.

Empowering adults at Tyng.

Mr. Ryon not only empowered students, he shared power with teachers and staff in many ways. Frequently, the lines dividing administrators, teachers, and staff were blurred. Mr. Ryon portrayed himself on an equal level as other adults in the school. He washed tables in the cafeteria, answered the phone in the main office, picked-up trash on the playground, and supervised students in classrooms.

Next, Tim empowered teachers to come together to talk and find their own voice. Said in another way, Mr. Ryon allowed adults to "take an active rather than a passive stance toward their work [which] encouraged them to be their own experts . . . and to find new and effective ways to construct the classroom and workplace environment" (Regan and Brooks, 1995, p.81). Tim explained a clear example of teacher empowerment or what Regan and Brooks (1995) called relational knowing. He said:

> We had a grade level SFA meeting last night and there were some tense discussion and misunderstandings, but what came out of it was worthwhile. [A student now has a plan that will help her succeed.] At the end, one teacher said, 'I have to say this--this year is better, there's a lot more bitching to each other.' Everyone laughed, and she continued, 'But that's good--this year it is more meaningful because we are doing it in a way that helps each other.'

Another way Mr. Ryon empowered adults was to provide opportunities for them to complete tasks that many administrators would consider part of his or her leadership responsibilities. To illustrate, one teacher handled much of the paper work and financial duties associated with Tim's principalship, which allowed Mr. Ryon more time to work with a needy population of students and parents. By way of another example, a number of teachers wanted to go to a reading conference and sent in requests for funding.

However, Mr. Ryon was informed that there was only enough funding to send three individuals to the session. He was then asked to name the three that would be going. Instead of giving an answer, he said he would get back to them. Tim then contacted one of the teachers involved and asked her to talk among her colleagues and come up with a list. In a short while, a list was delivered, with a request that Tim contact central office to see if those teachers who couldn't go this time would be able to go to a conference in the spring. Mr. Ryon called central office, with the list of names and the teacher's special request.

Finally, Mr. Ryon enabled adults at Tyng to grow professionally, by searching for opportunities and funding. In two conversations on school reform, Tim mentioned how he believed he contributed. He said, "All I think I have done is to give teachers opportunities to grow and then searched for funding for their projects. --and-- The program [SFA] has helped. What I've done is to seek out the funding to provide the positions needed for it to work."

Empowering parents and community.

In addition to empowering students and adults, Mr. Ryon used empowerment to connect parents and community members to the school. Parents volunteered in classrooms, sold popcorn, and helped coach. Tim said, "We have made a conscious effort to get community and parents interested in and a part of the school." As a result, Tyng went from having only one community partner (Burger King) to having four partnerships to provide needed help and materials. To reward student accomplishments, Burger King provided free lunches, and the Peoria Medical Alliance Auxiliary bought a washer and dryer for school use. The Peoria Travel Bureau sponsored a Traveling Tiger Program, where stuff tigers were taken on far-away places, pictures were taken, a brief journal was written, and then the journey was shared in classrooms. The Junior League and Downtown Rotary Club read books to children and then donated the books to the library. Still, another project that brought school and

community together was the creation of the Friendship Garden. Students, teachers, parents and community members donated time and supplies to turn a vacant lot into a beautiful garden, where Tyng's children could learn about working together, contributing service, and caring for nature. Finally, what increased parent and community involvement, in part, were the warm welcome and respect they received from Tim and others at Tyng Primary.

What was the result of Mr. Ryon's ability to empower others? First, students were more successful, motivated, productive, and happy. Next, teachers were energetic, acting as experts, sharing ideas, and teaching each other. Finally, parents and community members were contributing ideas, helping to make the school a better place for their children, and feeling an integrated and valuable part of Lucie B. Tyng Primary.

A Conciliating Leader

> When I am working on a problem, I never think about beauty. I think only of how to solve the problem. But when I am finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.
>
> Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983), American inventor

Research suggests that on measures of higher order cognitive processes (such as problem solving) American students rank far below other countries (Armstrong, 1994). Taking this information to heart, Tim Ryon was definitely doing his part to resolve this dilemma. Problem solving was an integral part of Mr. Ryon's leadership. At times, it was difficult to separate this attribute from caring and empowering. With Tim, adults and children knew they would be expected to problem solve.

Showing students how to solve problems.

A big share of Mr. Ryon's day was spent teaching students problem solving skills. If the children did not know how to solve a difficulty, he would teach the conflict resolution steps. However, if individuals were experienced in conflict resolution, he

briefly reiterated the steps and allowed them to resolve their own difficulties. Many times, he vacated his office to let children problem solve and later checked on their progress. Once a plan was created, students shared it will Mr. Ryon, he commended them on their success, and he would send them back to class.

The bottom-line message from Tim Ryon was, "There is no problem that can't be solved. We just need to let our kids know what's expected and give them ways to solve their own problems." As way of proof, I have countless stories that depict Tim allowing children to find their own "beautiful" solutions. However, I'll describe one brief example. With a teacher's impatience, a young child was sent to the office. She was hurt and angry. Even with damaged dignity, she sat up straight, looked Mr. Ryon right in the eyes, and told her story. He complimented her on her forthrightness and told her he knew she was capable of solving the issue. Through pondering and brainstorming, she decided to apologize to the teacher for her rudeness and to ask for help in a better way. Yet, she was uncertain on how she could get her teacher not to treat her rudely. In the true sense of service, Mr. Ryon said, "What can I do to help?" It was decided that Tim should write a letter explaining the child's version and her future plan of action. When finished the young girl and Mr. Ryon walked back to class, hand-in-hand, as she held the letter tightly in her other hand.

Seeking solutions with teachers and staff.

Along with children, teachers and staff were invited to find their own voice (Regan and Brooks, 1995), by finding their own solutions to problems. In a conversation with Mr. Ryon, he concisely explained his plan to "support staff and consequently make them feel competent," by showing them they were capable of resolving their own issues--individually and together. Stated earlier and repeated here, he said:

> I see a change in the attitude among teachers, which is to be expected [with SFA]. It was what I've been trying to affect. In two ways--conscience ways--the conflict resolution model for teachers. . . then more recently. . .started this year, purposefully. . . is to turn situations back over to them. And not quite in these words but as much to say: 'What do you want to do about it?' Lots of listening, lots of eye contact, lots of reaffirmation, lots of repeating what they have told me. . . 'How would you like to see this resolved?' . . . 'What do you suppose we can do about it?' Sometimes, I say, 'What is it, you expect of me?' . . . 'What is it, you expect of the children?' Nine times out of ten, by the time we get to that point, they'll say, 'Why don't I just take him and solve the situation.' This is what I am hoping will happen.

Now that teachers are encouraged to solve their own issues, Mr. Ryon has noticed a dramatic decrease in the number of telephone calls he gets at home. Also, Tim said the quality of time he spends with teachers has improved. In addition to sharing successes with him, looking to him for confirmation on ideas, and asking for his signature, teachers had fun with Mr. Ryon. They laughed, joked, teased, and spent time developing caring relationships.

Problem solving with parents and members of the community.

Along with students and staff, parents were invited to seek answers in this solution-based school. Whenever a parent or community member had a problem, Tim respectfully encouraged them to seek solutions. If individuals' options were less than ideal, Mr. Ryon would guide them to accept other suggestions that were more beneficial. For example, one parent, angry at her child's teacher, wanted the child moved to another room. After much listening, reaffirming, and respectful dialogue, the parent decided to leave the child in her current classroom and to work out a plan to resolve the differences between the teacher and herself.

Adults and children (connected in their search to find answers to problems) discovered three principles. First, when resolving issues, there are no right or wrong solutions. There are only individuals struggling to come up with answers that will work for them and not necessarily for anyone else. Second, with conflict

resolution, we model for our children that when there is conflict between us, we no longer have to mobilize our forces against each other. Instead, we can put our energies into searching for the kind of solutions which respect the needs of all of us. Third, by using problem solving, we are showing people that they need not be passive or helpless, but they can be active participants in solving many of the problems that confront them now and in the years to come (Anstine Templeton, 1996).

Completing the Circle of Care: An Evaluation

> The circle is a sacred symbol of life . . . Individual parts within the circle connect with every other; and what happens to one, or what one part does, affects all within the circle.
> Virginia 0 Sneve (1987)

Evaluating what was described and interpreted in this study, at first glance, appeared simple. I was fortunate enough to have observed a leader, who cared, empowered, and accommodated children and adults, so they were able to begin creating a positive learning environment--end of educational criticism. However, backing up a bit and looking below the surface, one could see some problematic educational issues that even exceptional leaders (like Tim Ryon) would find difficult (and at times impossible) to work around. Overload and the limitations of his leadership role were problems that plagued this exceptional principal.

As noted in the beginning, Mr. Ryon guided an at risk school--meaning because of environmental factors, its approximately 700 students were at risk for school and community failure. In other words, Tim was dangerously overloaded with needy children, increased accountability, an overwhelmed faculty (in the midst of change), and parents struggling to survive. These are not uncommon difficulties for leaders in at risk schools; however, the danger of burnout becomes a real possibility. Research indicates

that when individuals provide more care than they receive, then burnout is imminent (Deiro, 1996; Noddings, 1992; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

As described in the descriptive section of this paper, Tim was a caring leader who spent hectic, fast-paced days listening, modeling, and problem solving with students and faculty. Unfortunately, this placed him in a position of giving more care than receiving, which meant a caring cycle could not be completed (Deiro, 1996). This is not to imply that Tyng's children and adults were not caring or learning how to care--they were. To repeat, once again, what Mr. Ryon stated, "These are humans, and it takes a long time." Angry children who do not trust adults, cannot respond caringly. Additionally, when overburden teachers and staff have too many responsibilities and are educating unresponsive children, then it's hard for them to have the time or energy to say, "Thank you" or to show appreciation.

At times, some adults were frustrated, because the demands of the children and adults were greater than one caring principal and administrative assistant could handle. This frustration is reflected in two individuals' comments. One person focused on his or her frustration, and the other individual focused on what he or she thought Tim must be feeling. They explained:

> I'd like to say many good things are in progress, but sometimes the system falls apart. I feel I am a child centered educator and I try not to back children into a corner. However, at times, there are two or three children in one room, who are extreme in their behavior and the office can only handle so much. I am very frustrated with this. The administration tries to respond and support you, but they are not always available. I feel this is an issue as a district, also--how to handle extreme behavior.
>
> --and--
>
> He wants to understand, to make them feel safe, to provide them what they need. This is very hard for him to do on the many, many days, where he is pulled in a multitude of different directions. . . . It is on those days that he appears most frustrated and, while he is never uncaring, his behavior may appear inconsistent.

Drake and Roe (1994) tell us that, under these hectic conditions, "the principal should

help set up strategies to assist all concerned in helping solve the current problems and prevent similar problems in the future" (p, 195). By empowering students, staff, and parents to seek solutions to their problems, Mr. Ryon was creating a self-correcting system. A system where preventive planning was used before small irritations became huge issues. Tim's work environment was overloaded to the breaking point. Nevertheless, it was amazing how the "caring one" could meet the many needs of the "cared for." Mr. Ryon certainly did, albeit not without some frustration and emotional strain. Insightfully, Tim also looked toward the future, he said another reason he empowered individuals to resolve issues was for his well-being and to allow him to remain focused on improving education for Tyng's children.

In addition to experiencing work overload, Tim had to sometimes cope with the frustration of being a leader with little authority to get services, funding, or supplies he knew students, parents and staff needed. Students, for example, had needs that required additional support services, and Tim struggled with finding ways to get those needs met, within a financially depressed district. More specifically, many students would have benefited from counseling, but there was no funding for additional counseling services. To help with this problem (but by no means resolve it) Mr. Ryon arranged to have a student doing her counseling internship spend part of her week at Tyng. Also, there were children who had social workers, who agreed to work with the school to ensure that their clients succeeded. However, these plans of success were often unsuccessful, because Tim had a difficult time locating the social worker or the social worker was too busy to talk or the social worker had changed clients, and the new social worker wasn't familiar with the child's plan. Knowing what students needed and not being able to meet their needs, wearied Tim Ryon.

Like Fullan and Hargreaves (1991), Mr. Ryon knew when individuals grew professionally it resulted in school improvement and better learning for students. So, with teachers and staff, Tim continually encouraged them to mature professionally but

then had a difficult time acquiring the needed funding to support their improvement efforts. As mentioned earlier, a number of teachers were excited about increasing their knowledge base and having a little time (which is rare at Tyng) to collaborate. Yet, because of partial funding, only three educators instead of six could attend the conference.

Also, Mr. Ryon became annoyed because of his inability to provide a closer link from the school to the community. Not to down play, the dramatic increase in positive community connections that had recently developed; however, a large void still existed, because Tyng no longer had its home-school facilitator. As a result, children who were sick or had head lice, ringworm, or pink eye had to wait at school, until a parent without transportation figured out a way to get them. There were days when five or more children (for health reasons) were stranded at school--unhappily waiting. Although not a solution, but in the true spirit of caring, cots were set up in Mr. Ryon's office to make sick children as comfortable as possible. Additionally, students who refused to problem solve or learn had to wait in the office for rides. This added to the number of children waiting to go home Ultimately, administrators were forced to leave the building to drive children home, which was not a good alternative, since it left the school with a short-handed support system.

Finally, without a home-school facilitator, parents no longer had an important link to the school. In years past, it was not uncommon for this person to take children home or transport parents to the school for meetings. Additionally, the home-school facilitator was known to make home deliveries, with notes from teachers, documents that required parental signatures, and even medicine from the local drug store. In other words, this was a way individuals at Tyng showed parents they cared about them and their children. At the end of my study, Tim (with his optimistic nature) was still searching for a way to reconnect this broken link between parents and school. Yet, not without feeling frustrated, for Mr. Ryon knew that to complete the caring cycle or to build a sense of

community, parents must be included in their children's education.

However overloaded by work demands or annoyed with bureaucratic roadblocks, Mr. Ryon remained hopeful. Fullan (1997) tells us that hopeful leaders do two things. First, they continue to work with students, parents, and other educators to improve education, even when it seems impossible. Second, hopeful leaders "participate in the politics of altering the structural conditions of schools so that reform and quality have a greater chance of being built into daily experiences" (p. 231) of schools. Tim did both.

The Courage to Care: Reflections and Themes

> In the final analysis, the values of courage are demonstrated in the actions of those who emerged at many times and places in history to bring dignity to the lives of children.
>
> Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990, p. 95)

When I walk down Tyng's halls my heart sings because it feels like a positive and friendly environment. Is it perfect? No. Do some teachers and staff still embarrass and humiliate children? Yes. Is there too much caring and listening and modeling and problem solving for two administrators to accomplish? Yes. Nevertheless, individuals at Tyng are more caring, empowering, and accommodating, than they were in 1992. Am I biased? Yes. However, adults who were there in 1992 support my belief. Asked to describe the school climate in 1992 adults responded, "chaotic" (50%), "tense," "depressed," "fragmented," and "fractured." For 1996, adults labeled the school environment as, "nurturing," "busy," "special," "supportive," "learning," "caring," and "safe," with only two negative responses--"fractured" and "fragmented." School improvement, from 1992 to 1996, was explained succinctly by one teacher: "getting better all the time."

After reflecting above, let me discuss an under lying theme that has threaded itself throughout this study. At Tyng Primary, caring individuals are working under chaotic conditions because they care about children. To illustrate, one teacher stated, "I

don't think there's one person here who doesn't want the children to succeed." Another educator said, "We have to care about kids. Why else would we work under such stressful conditions?" How long can these good people remain positive and hopeful? To sustain hope, reform experts insist that the focus needs to switch from trying to "fix" students, teachers and leaders, as a way to improve schools (Fiske, 1991; Fullan, 1997; Sarason, 1995). I agree. Instead of "fixing" people, these reformers discuss several structural alternatives. One believes schools, by state law, should be declared unconstitutional, so they can be redesigned for the future (Fiske, 1991). Another believes that by developing different internal configurations and policy frameworks, caring people (like Tim Ryon) would be able to continue school improvement, without work overload, roadblocks, and eventually burnout (Fullan, 1997). Still another radically suggests that students may learn best without schools and classrooms (Sarason, 1995).

I do not propose to have the answer to this educational conundrum, but I am certain that restructuring the framework of out traditional school system (in some fashion) must become a top priority; we cannot afford to lose anymore caring individuals (like those at Tyng) to negativism and burnout. We cannot risk losing any more children to a system that has lost its mission of supporting educational leaders in their goal to provide a caring education for all children. Let me end with a bit of insight acquired while doing this project. During our first conversation, when Mr. Ryon said, "But these are humans, and it takes a long time" I was unaware of how this simple comment would become so meaningful. Now, after weeks of observation and conversations, I read the statement, and know in my heart that the people at Lucie B. Tyng Primary are more than humans--they are super humans. Only super humans can create a caring environment (day after day) in the middle of such chaos. Tim thinks the children are Tyng's angels, but I disagree. I think the "real" Tyng angels are the adults who struggle daily in hopes of "bringing dignity to the lives of children" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern, 1990, p. 95).

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